


History and a Hill

Los Angeles Loses a Landmark

By L. Mildred Harris

HE pages of California history open with new interest, for Fort Moore Hill, historical landmark adjoining the Los Angeles Civic Center, is being torn down to make room for the super-highways which will link the city to surrounding communities.

California is celebrating its Centennial years, but the recorded history of Los Angeles pre-dates the founding of the California republic by more than half a century. And doubtless long before a settlement was ever dreamed of Fort Moore Hill, as it was later known, was a vantage point for the Indians, commanding from its crest a view of the river and the rolling hills of chaparral and wildflowers.

It was at the foot of Fort Moore Hill on September 4, 1781, 169 years ago, that "El Pueblo de Nuestro Senora la Reina de Los Angeles"—The City of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels—was founded. For eight years California had been a Spanish province, with its capital in Monterey. Felipe de Neve became Governor in February, 1777. He was evidently a man of ability and foresight, a man of action, second only to Junipero Serra. Following the Spanish plan of centering pueblos around a plaza for protection as well as for social life, Governor de Neve made his plans for establishing a community near the Rio Porcuincula, so named by Father Crespi and Portola in 1769 (now called the Los Angeles River) and secured the sanction of leaders in the Mexican Provinces and of the King of Spain, Carlos the Third. The plan called for bringing as settlers twenty-four families from Mexico, families especially adapted for the type of community plan. Land was to be given to each farmer for use during his life and could pass to his children at death, but it could not be mortgaged or sold. The site of the new pueblo was chosen, the land was laid out and plans made with great care, but only eleven families

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were secured. The day arrived and led by the Governor himself and military and mission leaders, and accompanied by Indian acolytes, the eleven families, numbering forty-four persons, marched the nine miles from San Gabriel Mission. After circling the Plaza they stopped at an altar which had been erected, mass was said, and they were addressed by the Governor. Lots were assigned to the settlers and in proper ceremony the new pueblo was founded. Homes, a guardhouse and a public granary were grouped around the central plaza, and extending to the regions beyond were thirty-six square miles for cultivation and grazing.

Nine miles by ox team was a long way to go to church and in 1784 the first church was dedicated. It was completed in 1789-90. As the city grew this proved to be inadequate and the cornerstone of the Old Plaza Church as it now stands at Sunset and North Main Street was laid August 15, 1814, the building not being completed until 1822. Although built primarily for white settlers and not as a mission in the strictest sense of the word, it has so served through the years that it is connected with the romance of early California missions and still serves a great Mexican population, for Los Angeles has the second largest Mexican population of any city in the world, being exceeded only by Mexico City.

History records the growth of the city from eleven families and forty-four persons in the beginning. By 1800 there were 70 families, a population of 315, and thirty adobe houses. Except for the decade from 1850 to 1860, when the lure of gold drew most of the newcomers to Northern California, the city at least doubled its population every ten years. One of the primary purposes in the establishment of the community was to make importation of supplies from San Blas, Mexico, unnecessary. By the turn of the century Los Angeles was exporting 3,400 bushels of wheat a year and 12,000 head of cattle roamed the grazing land. Names common throughout Southern California today stem from the early settlers—such names as Sepulveda, Figueroa, Pico, Lugo, Verdugo, Alvarado, Olvera and Temple.

No trace of the original buildings or lot stakes remain, but in all probability one corner of the present Plaza Park adjoins one corner of the original plaza at Sunset and Main Streets. Across the street to the west of the Park is the Old Plaza Catholic Church, referred to above. To the south still stands Pico House, built in

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1869, the finest hotel in the southwest at the time. To the east is the last remnant of Old Chinatown, which at one time had a population of 7,000 Chinese. Beyond it lies the Union Station, built in 1939 at a cost of \$11,000,000.00. To the north is Olvera Street, an early thoroughfare of Los Angeles, with typical Mexican shops. The Avila Adobe House, built in 1818 and scene of many historic events, still stands on this street. This house was taken as his headquarters by Commodore Stockton in 1847 when California became a part of the United States. On this street also is an early brick house, built in 1854, a water trough, hand hewn by the Mission Indians in 1820, and other reminders of historic events.

Spain was so occupied with the Napoleonic Wars that little attention was given to the Western colonies, and by 1822 she had relinquished her Western possessions. The flag of Mexico flew over the Plaza at Los Angeles for twenty-five years. Settlers from the East were coming overland and around the Horn, and in order to own land they became Mexican citizens. They intermarried into the Spanish families and assumed leadership and responsibilities. It was a period of revolutions, with eight regular appointed governors and six others who of their own accord assumed leadership, and it is not surprising that sometimes the city was called "Los Diablos."

In the War with Mexico leaders hoped to add California to the list of states favoring Negro slavery, replacing Indian slavery. We are grateful that they were not successful. The American flag flew over most of California at almost the same time. Because of bungling on the part of certain military leaders Los Angeles was recaptured by the Californians shortly afterwards and several battles were fought before the Americans regained control. The bloodiest of these battles was at San Pasqual, near San Diego. A detachment of the army under General Stephen W. Kearney had set forth from Leavenworth, Kansas, with a force of 1,600 men and equipment. They left in June, 1864, raising the American flag and establishing garrisons in Arizona and New Mexico. By December they had reached San Diego and there learned of the rebellion at Los Angeles. The battle of San Pasqual followed. The Americans were tired and the strategy not well planned, and many of our soldiers were killed, among them Captain Benjamin D. Moore. However, it was a victory for the Americans because the Californians retreated.

At the old Cahuenga Ranch House, near Universal City, General John C. Fremont and General Andreas Pico signed the Treaty of Cahuenga on January 13, 1847. With this the Mexican War ceased and California and portions of neighboring states were ceded by Mexico to the United States.

A year and a half of military rule followed. On the high promontory above the pueblo of Los Angeles a fort was planned for protection. One was started under the direction of Lt. Wm. H. Emory but was not completed. Shortly afterward a Mormon battalion which had been organized in Illinois and Missouri constructed the fort which would house two hundred soldiers. A flag-pole was necessary and Colonel J. B. Stevenson, then in charge, dispatched men to the San Bernardino Mountains, some sixty miles away, to bring back a suitable one. Juan Ramirez, with Indian laborers and ten Mormon soldiers to protect them from the mountain Indians, went to the headwaters of Mill Creek and after considerable time returned with two tree trunks, one 90 feet and the other 75 feet long, each carried on the axles of a dozen old carretas—two wheeled carts with wooden wheels. Some of the carretas are to be seen today in Olvera Street similar to the ones used. Each was drawn by twenty yoke of oxen with an Indian driver to each ox. The trunks were spliced together and the 150 foot pole raised at North Broadway and Rock Street, later Fort Moore Place.

On July 4, 1847, the soldiers formed a hollow square, the Declaration of Independence was read, the American flag was raised and the salute given. The fort was named in honor of Captain Benjamin D. Moore, who lost his life at San Pasqual, "for his courage as a soldier, his patriotism as an American and his character as a man and a gentleman."

In a few short years the battalions were mustered out of service and the fort was deserted and in time fell into decay. A historical marker was eventually placed on the site and the grounds became a picnic playground. Surrounding it were some of the finest homes, apartments and schools in Los Angeles. But as time passed and the city grew the better residential section followed the growing edge and this section on top of the hill deteriorated. For years it was the center of a large French population and later for the Mexican population.

Early in the Twentieth century a tunnel for streetcars and horsedrawn vehicles was constructed under Fort Moore Hill. In



May, 1949 — Plaza Park Catholic Church, Fort Moore Hill (note tunnel entrance)



The same location on September 30, 1949 — Note amount of excavation and visibility of Board of Education on top of the hill

FORT MOORE HILL, LOS ANGELES
From Methodist Headquarters Building, Sunset and Los Angeles



*Steps, Fort Moore Hill, where houses have been moved away. Hall of Justice
in background — June, 1949*



*September, 1949, — Looking down from North Hill Street in front of
Board of Education*

FROM SPRING STREET, NEAR SUNSET BOULEVARD



October 7, 1949



Broadway Tunnel Arch, October 25, 1949 — Showing Board of Education on top of hill

FROM "WHERE THE HILL ONCE STOOD"



North Broadway, looking North from where the tunnel arch stood. Top of mucker in excavation for underpass, January, 1950. Compare with arch picture of October, 1949



Excavation for underpass, January, 1950. Federal Building at right. Note street car on temporary track around Fort Moore Hill

FROM NORTH HILL, NEAR CALIFORNIA STREET, LOOKING EAST

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May of 1949, it was closed and traffic routed around the side of the hill, for the tunnel must go as part of the Freeway expansion.

A century has passed and Los Angeles is no more the pueblo of the past but a city that stretches to the sea. It is no longer a village of adobe dwellings but a city of steel and stone, of industry and business, of homes and churches, a city of two million people. Oxcarts and horsedrawn vehicles have given way to speeding automobiles and swifter airplanes. Dusty roads have become paved highways crisscrossing the city. But this is not enough to satisfy the needs of modern civilization, and now a series of connecting super-highways are to link Los Angeles to neighboring communities. Once it was a matter of days to reach them. Now it is a matter of minutes, or a few hours at the most. And Fort Moore Hill is being removed to make way for another "century of progress."

Homes and apartments on top of the hill were torn down or loaded on giant timbers and moved to new locations. Only cement steps and rubble filled basements remained as mute reminders of the city that had been. Then, in March of 1949, the "machines" moved in—bulldozers, and steam shovels and trucks. Chief among them was the giant steel "mucker," weighing 300,000 pounds, 300 horsepower, powered by 2300 volts of electricity. Four railroad flatcars hauled the big digger—in pieces—from San Francisco. It had been used in the construction of Hoover Dam, San Gabriel and Hansen Dams and in preparation for an airport site at Mills Field. Guy F. Atkinson, contractor, agreed to remove the hill at a cost of \$914,158. A total of 835,000 cubic yards of earth are being removed by a fleet of trucks, working through the night to avoid the traffic, dumping "history" into a ravine in Elysian Park to enlarge its area. Fort Moore Hill comes down, one steel bucketful after another, truck load after truck load. Faith *can* remove a mountain—faith and works—but history remains, not in the hill but in the hearts of those who love the city and its people and who strive to make its highways "roads to better tomorrows."

SOURCE MATERIAL

"La Reina—Los Angeles in Three Centuries" published February 11, 1929, by the Security Trust and Savings Bank of Los Angeles.
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Newspaper articles.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

A HILL COMES DOWN

FORT MOORE HILL, LOS ANGELES

By L. Mildred Harris

I watch a hill come down—a high, historic hill
Upon whose crown a city grew across the years.
Once, just as other hills, it lay beneath the sun,
And Indians climbed its trails to light their signal fires.
The golden poppies laced the grasses on its slopes
And at its feet a lazy river bent its way.

The decades passed in swift review; the Spanish came,
Laid out a small pueblo, a plaza at its heart,
And built adobe dwellings near the river's banks.
Then faithful padres from San Gabriel chose the site
To build a church to serve the families living there.
Los Angeles was born in those historic days.

Again the decades passed, and on this well known hill
Fort Moore stood watch above the village at its feet,
And from its shelter troops went forth to claim the land
And raise the Stars and Stripes for all to see.

A century and more have passed, and from the spot
The city stretches to the sea and crowds the hills.
Tall towers of rigid steel and stone reach up,
And sprawling plants of newborn industry reach out.
Paved highways race each other through the city miles
And noisy traffic flows in endless streams.
The pencilled beams from searchlights signal all the sky,
And neon signs make rainbows for each night.

Today another army moves upon the sides
Of Fort Moore Hill. The tractors and the muckers cut
Their jagged gashes in the yellow clay and rock.
Day after day the giant jaws of steel dig deep.
A thousand trucks ten thousand tons convey
Until the mountainside is moved away.

Gone is the crest where Indians watched the western sun,
And gone the slopes where golden poppies bloomed in spring.
And where the hill once stood the masterplan reveals
The interlacing highways that will center there,
Converging at the city's heart.

Someday new trails will meet upon the site,
At night new gold from car lights gleam upon its curves.
The echoes of the storied past come to me still
As History's finger writes again upon the hill.